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Thursday → 14 March 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Casualties in Vietnam

1. As of 13 March, MACV reported 59,322 enemy KIA and 91,322 enemy wounded since 1 January 1968. During the same period 12,885 individual weapons and 2,789 crew served weapons were seized on the battle field. Allied/ARVN losses in this time span were 7,286 KIA and 33,625 wounded.
2. The disparity between Communist and friendly losses and between enemy KIA and weapons seized has caused most observers in Washington to view MACV claims of enemy KIA with the greatest skepticism. This is particularly true with respect to ARVN claims where the disparity in admitted losses and claimed Communist casualties is particularly great. And numerous individual incidents can be cited to show how claims of enemy KIA have been based, not on verified body count, but on someone's wild guess.
3. Yet there has always been another side to this old issue of enemy casualties. MACV points out that there are

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substantial enemy casualties, resulting from air strikes and artillery, as around Khe Sanh and the DMZ, which are never counted. In MACV's view, these more than offset any inflation in the reported figures resulting from over enthusiasm, hasty estimating, or the inevitable inclusion of porters and innocent civilians. MACV also claims, and occasionally demonstrates, that initial reports of enemy KIA are often low; later interrogations, captured documents, or the uncovering of mass graves show casualties in a particular encounter to be higher than claimed. A possible recent example of this occurred in the 11-13 March action west of Tam Ky. On 11 March, MACV reported the enemy withdrew after being subjected to ground and air attacks "leaving 78 dead". On 12 March, in an area slightly west and north US elements found a fresh grave with 51 enemy bodies.

4. Another argument made by MACV is that their estimate on enemy wounded is conservative. For every KIA, they estimate 1.5 wounded. US troops in Vietnam suffer about 6 wounded or 3 hospitalized for every KIA. The 1.5 ratio may be reasonable in terms of those permanently lost because of serious wounds, but based on US experience it appears low as a measure of the

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effective combat strength of particular enemy units for some time after they have been in action. In rough terms, if we assumed 3 Communists were seriously wounded for every KIA, the total losses in terms of combat effective since 1 January would reach the astounding figure of 240,000.

5. I am not arguing that MACV's figures are about right, but the case against MACV's figures has not been made. Until it is and before we dismiss the MACV figures out of hand, we should, from time to time, consider what they would mean in terms of Communist capabilities and intentions. And now is a particular moment when a clear view of the situation of Communist forces in the field is of basic importance.

6. Is the enemy ready for a general attack in I Corps, in the Highlands, and against Saigon? If not, can he train enough replacements while keeping main force units close to the towns and cities and exposed to continued attrition? (Who is doing the training?) Are the units recently moved in from North Vietnam really "reinforcements" or more like replacements for battered units now in place? Are Communist forces really spread thin and putting up a brave front by constant maneuvering, mortar and artillery attacks, occasional sharp

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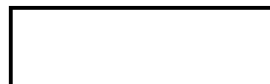
assaults and the spreading of alarmist rumors about impending offensives?

7. Is his overall situation so serious that he will husband his resources until about May and then make a final all-out effort?

8. All of these questions obviously suggest a situation that could only be entertained in a state of extreme delusion. But we have given much emphasis in recent weeks to the poor shape of the GVN and ARVN and have dismissed MACV's casualty figures with little further thought. At the same time, we have not inquired closely into the failure of Communist units to attack Dakto after lengthy preparations, or assault Khe Sanh, or to take offensive action in I Corps despite much "manuvering". And now we note that the 7th and 9th Divisions have pulled back "somewhat" from Saigon.

9. There is of course a reasonable explanation for all these phenomena that does not involve any important revision of our views of Communist capabilities and intentions. But it would be prudent to have another look at the enemy's position before we give him the ball game.

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